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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001138

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: DISGRUNTLED SWISS ENVOY TRASHES FRENCH DIALOGUE  
INITIATIVE

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

#### SUMMARY AND COMMENT

¶1. (C) In a 7/26 meeting with the Ambassador, Swiss envoy Didier Pfirter projected both sour grapes and some reasonable-sounding analysis in trashing the French dialogue initiative. While smarting from being upstaged by the French diplomacy (with French envoy Jean-Claude Cousseran refusing to meet him when both overlapped in Beirut), Pfirter said that the Swiss remained committed to their own initiative and would reconvene participants in Switzerland in mid-August. Pfirter said that the French had weakened March 14/GOL leaders, who made too many concessions out of fear of losing their traditional French ally under the new French administration. Hizballah, suspicious of the French, hardened its positions. Whereas more subtle (i.e., Swiss) diplomacy could have narrowed gaps, the French were moving the goal-posts in Hizballah's favor.

¶2. (C) Advocating USG-Hizballah contacts (which the Ambassador rejected), Pfirter also felt that Hizballah representatives had become victims of their own propaganda, sincerely believing that the USG, and the Ambassador in particular, were dictating March 14/GOL positions. Shifting into the fantasyland where Saad Hariri and Hassan Nasrallah would walk amiably hand-in-hand, Pfirter said that the Swiss still hoped, once the French admitted failure, to invite all National Dialogue leaders to Switzerland, for several days of interaction in an isolated resort. Pfirter compared this approach to the Dayton talks that ended the Bosnian civil war. Pfirter expressed strong interest in keeping in touch with USG officials, offering to fly to Washington to meet with NEA. End summary and comment.

#### TRASHING THE FRENCH INITIATIVE

¶3. (C) On 7/26, the Ambassador met Didier Pfirter, Swiss Ambassador at Large for Special Projects, who was in Beirut in the hopes of moving the low-profile, ongoing, civil society-focused Swiss dialogue initiative to a higher level. Pfirter spent much of the hour-long meeting trashing the French dialogue initiative. French Special Envoy Cousseran, in Beirut at the same time as Pfirter, had refused Pfirter's request to meet. Their only interaction was when both attended the 450-person dinner MP Saad Hariri hosted for outgoing French Ambassador Bernard Emie (not the most intimate setting for serious discussion).

14. (C) The French "pulled the rug out from under us," Pfirter complained; "the French make it obvious that they consider us superfluous." While everyone wants to avoid a "traffic jam of mediation," the Swiss were ready to enlist their efforts as a complementary tool to reinforce the French, but the French are unresponsive. Pfirter noted that, in Emie's extensive, expansive, prepared remarks at the Hariri dinner, he did not mention the Swiss, the Arab League, the Americans, "or even the Europeans."

FRENCH GET EXCESSIVE CONCESSIONS FROM MARCH 14,  
BUT HIZBALLAH HARDENS ITS POSITIONS  
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15. (C) Moving from sour grapes to substance, Pfirter said that, from his discussions in Beirut, it was clear that the French had inadvertently weakened the March 14/GOL majority. By posturing as equally open to both sides, the new French administration threw its traditional March 14/GOL allies into a panic. Afraid of losing the French, March 14/GOL leaders made concession after concession to avoid having to say no to the French. March 14 leaders tried too hard to avoid making a negative impression on the new French administration that they crossed their own red lines repeatedly.

16. (C) The French then took these excessive concessions to Hizballah leaders, who immediately rejected them. In Pfirter's analysis, Hizballah leaders were motivated by two factors in hardening their positions. First, proposals that other, more neutral parties (i.e., Swiss-style diplomats) might have been able to sell were viewed suspiciously when presented by the French, who have heretofore been solidly

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behind March 14. "Hizballah doesn't trust the French." Second, some Hizballah leaders perceived that the French, fearful of failure, would indeed pressure March 14, the softer party, into even more concessions. So the French succeeded only in moving the goalposts in Hizballah's favor, Pfirter argued. Hizballah is now emboldened to block everything and to reject suggestions that, had they come from others (undoubtedly the Swiss), might have been viewed as reasonable ideas.

17. (C) Pfirter mused about whether "Lebanon is now beyond salvation," because of the clumsy French diplomacy that was "more about Kouchner's ego than about Lebanon." Pfirter said that he was convinced that the French initiative would fail, but the question is what will the French do when they realize that they cannot extract any more concessions from the March 14/GOL side and that Hizballah won't budge. He feared that the French would see to it that their failure would adversely affect both Swiss and Arab mediation efforts. "Kouchner's attitude seems to be that, 'if I can't succeed, then no one can,'" Pfirter complained.

HIZBALLAH: CONVINCED USG  
DETERMINING MARCH 14 POSITIONS  
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18. (C) The Ambassador asked about Pfirter's contacts with Hizballah. Pfirter said that he met with Hizballah Executive Committee member Ali Fayyad, Deputy Secretary General Naim Qassim, Foreign Relations chief Nawaf Musawi, and unnamed others. Fayyad, Pfirter claimed, had so far been a constructive presence. Pfirter again attributed the hardening of Hizballah's positions to the French rather than to Iranian or Syrian instructions, rejecting the Ambassador's suggestion that Damascus and Tehran rather than Paris were the problem. Pfirter said that Musawi told him that La Celle-St. Cloud talks (in which Musawi, along with Mohamad Fneish, represented Hizballah) had been a "big win" for Hizballah and a "big lose" for everyone else, given that Hizballah representatives were received in France at the same level as the other Lebanese. Hizballah gave nothing for this

elevation in status, either in advance or during La Celle-St. Cloud talks.

¶9. (C) Pfirter also said that he also perceived that his Hizballah contacts were becoming victims of their own propaganda. They truly believe, he marveled, that the March 14/GOL forces take their orders from the USG and particularly from the Ambassador. PM Fouad Siniora is seen, sincerely, as a U.S. agent, who does not act without clearance from Embassy Beirut. When Pfirter tried to push back with his Hizballah contacts by arguing that Ambassador Feltman did not have the power and influence ascribed to him, the Hizballah officials accused him of naivete. "They think you are the devil," he said. Pfirter, revealing his European "all-dialogue-is-good" diplomatic roots, nevertheless advocated some contact between the Embassy and Hizballah, so that Hizballah would start getting a more accurate perception. The Ambassador rejected his proposal.

SWISS TO RECONVENE TALKS IN MID-AUGUST  
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¶10. (C) As for the Swiss initiative, Pfirter said the next session would convene in mid-August for the same 15 participants, from both the political and the civil society realms. After several previous rounds, the atmosphere is now very constructive, he said, with personal bonding that is conducive to creative thinking. He reported his intention to add three more representatives, including Mahmoud Berri (brother of Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri) and Mohamad Chatah (Siniora's senior advisor, who told us separately that he would decline the Swiss invitation, given that two others from Siniora's office already participate). He distinguished the Swiss initiative from the French initiative by noting that the 15 Lebanese act in their personal, not official, capacities, allowing them more freedom to talk and act. Second, the Swiss are encouraging the participants to look at what it would take to promote a genuine civil state in Lebanon rather than the "issues of the moment" examined by the French dialogue, such as the presidency and a National Unity Cabinet.

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SWISS SEEK "DAYTON-LIKE" APPROACH  
WITH NATIONAL DIALOGUE LEADERS  
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¶11. (C) Once the French initiative, already reeking, is declared dead and buried, Pfirter said that Switzerland still hopes to invite the National Dialogue leaders to a Swiss resort for 3-4 days of talks. While there would be an official agenda, the real work would be done on the margins, as the Lebanese leaders, insulated from the daily political and security grind in Lebanon, would interact informally. The Ambassador asked whether it isn't preferable to get the Lebanese leaders to meet in Lebanon, so as not to perpetuate the notion of an international trusteeship or to undermine Lebanon's own national institutions (such as they are).

¶12. (C) Moreover, the Ambassador noted, it is difficult to imagine Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah traveling to Switzerland, let alone walking in the Swiss woods arm-in-arm with Saad Hariri and Samir Ja'ja. Pfirter admitted that the Swiss notion might sound naive, but he made a comparison with the Dayton talks that led to the accord ending the Bosnian war. The Bosnians could not have come up with a workable formula had they been interacting solely through a few French-hosted meals. Instead, they needed extensive time together. The Swiss are prepared to devote that time. Hariri and Nasrallah, as well as the other political leaders, will benefit from the time spent together over meals, coffee, and breaks. But Nasrallah has to worry about Israeli assassination attempts, which might prevent his attendance, Pfirter lamented. The Ambassador noted that Hariri, Siniora, and others have to worry about assassination

attempts, too.

¶13. (C) Finally, Pfirter said that he was keenly interested in keeping in touch with USG officials as the Swiss moved forward. Besides comparing notes with the Ambassador when he is in Beirut, Pfirter expressed interest in going to Washington whenever NEA A/S Welch's schedule would permit a meeting.

COMMENT

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¶14. (C) So far, the Swiss initiative remains a sideshow -- mildly interesting and a harmless piece of political theatre. Lebanon's political leaders do not ascribe the same level of importance to this Swiss initiative as to either the French or the Arab League mediation. And therein perhaps lies its value: the Lebanese who participate do not have to look over their shoulders constantly to see what their mercurial leaders would think of their interventions, and the participants have been gathering frequently enough that, at least in theory, they no longer have to repeat their leaders' standard positions, as happened, say, in La Celle-St. Cloud. (With its razor-sharp discipline, however, we doubt that Hizballah has given its representatives the free rein that Rola Nouredine probably has from Fouad Siniora.) So, at best, the Swiss initiative could be an incubator for creative ideas that would feed back into Lebanon's leadership circles.

¶15. (C) While we think that Pfirter is overreaching in trying to get the National Dialogue leaders to an isolated Alpine resort -- an idea slightly ludicrous, despite the precedent of Swiss mediation (ultimately futile) during Lebanon's civil war -- we also do not see any reason to take the lead in destroying his fantasies: the Lebanese leaders themselves are unlikely to accept his invitation, thus confining the Swiss initiative to the lower-level civil society and political circles where, by filling a gap and keeping channels of communication open, it can be the most useful.

FELTMAN